

BBC

Gardeners' World magazine | **GUIDE**



Creative Christmas

75
seasonal
projects

ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW FOR A GARDEN-INSPIRED FESTIVE SEASON

Reissued for...
2025
Reissued for...



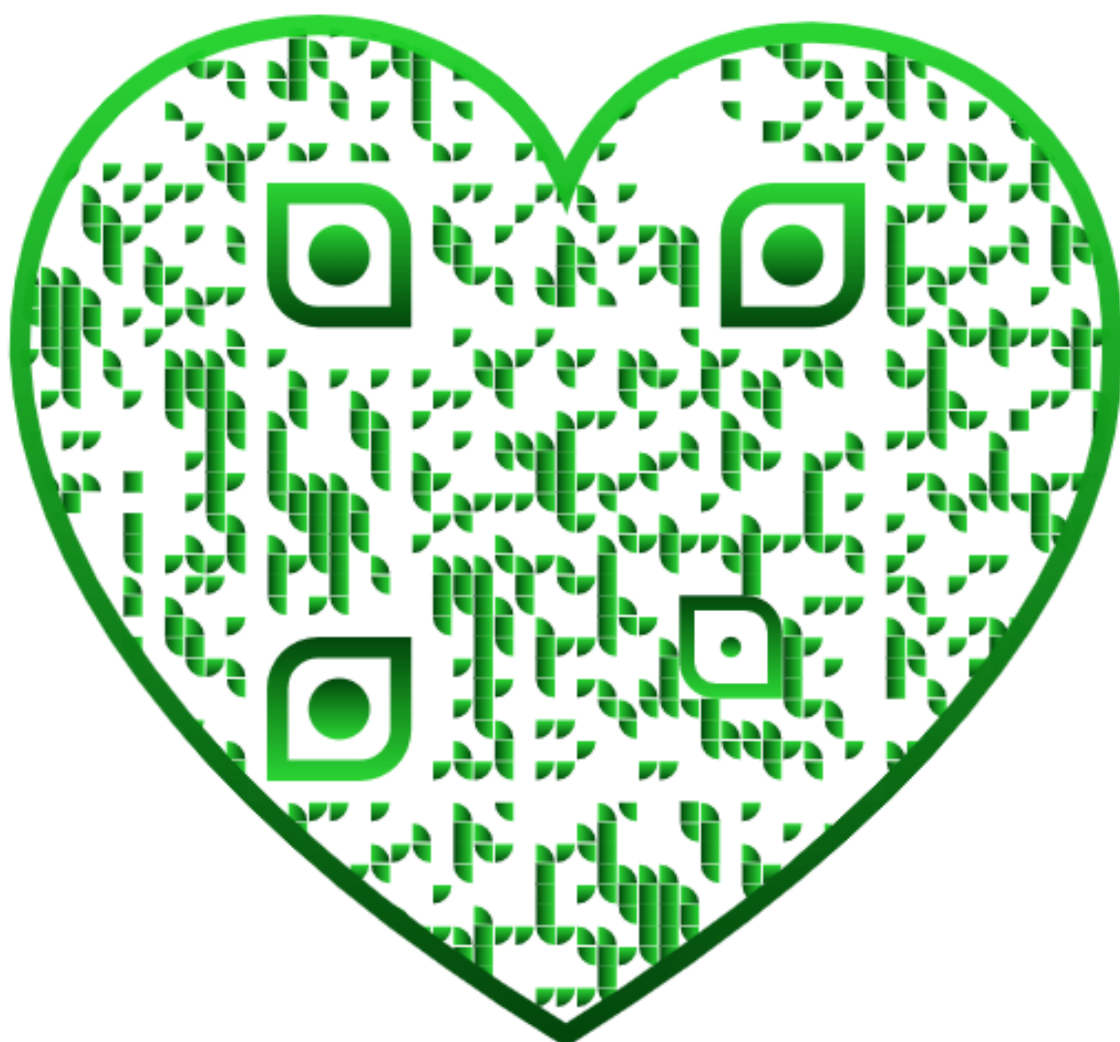
✓ Garden-forged wreaths



✓ Step-by-step guides



✓ Natural decorations



GRIPPING DRAMA...



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Welcome



**In the
countdown
to Christmas,**

decorating the
tree, picking out
gifts and filling
the house with

festive cheer is all part of the excitement, and if you make these things yourself it can be even more fun. Plus, it's a lovely way to get the whole family involved.

From a cheery wreath for the door to thoughtful homemade gifts, there's no end to what you can make using your garden as the source of inspiration. With vibrant berries, architectural seedheads and lush, colourful foliage, everything you need is right outside your back door, sustainable, plastic and glitter free, and completely unique to you.

In this special Christmas edition, you'll find advice on the best plants to use, step by step and ideas for using plants and produce to make your own gifts. We share tips on lighting the garden and creating sparkling winter containers, plus we help you get the best from your tree to ensure a magical festive season both inside and out. Have fun and a very merry Christmas!

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'Kay'.

Kay Maguire, Editor

BBC Gardeners' World Magazine





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Discover some of the best plants to decorate your house with this Christmas, from bright berries and architectural seedheads to evergreen grasses and attractive foliage



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It's easy to fill your house with festive cheer using our simple ideas, whether it's turning twigs into mini wreaths, bare stems into pretty trees, or mistletoe into mantelpiece swags



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Transform your tree this Christmas using materials gathered from the garden – making your own decorations is a free and fun activity for all the family

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Find out how to turn your garden trimmings, plants and produce into perfect presents this season, from home-made chutney to a tealight holder made out of birch prunings



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Get the best possible display from your Christmas tree and winter house plants with our practical care guide, full of helpful hints



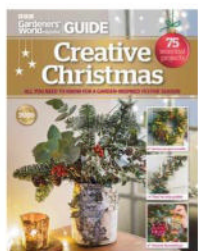
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Cover photos by
India Hobson and Jason Ingram



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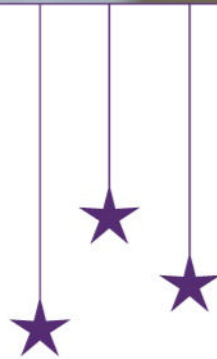


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120





20 festive plants to forage

Don't worry if you can't find the exact plants we've used in our creative projects – pick whatever is looking good in the garden instead. If you can't find anything to suit, ask friends and family if you can plunder their gardens. Here are some ideas for plants with attractive foliage, stems, berries and seedheads that can be transformed into decorations for your home, wreaths and Christmas tree.





1 Allium seedheads

Leave summer-flowering alliums to stand through autumn and winter. The pretty seedheads look striking in borders and can be used in a variety of home-made decorations, either naturally or spray painted gold or silver.

Flowers June to July

Height x Spread 1m x 10cm

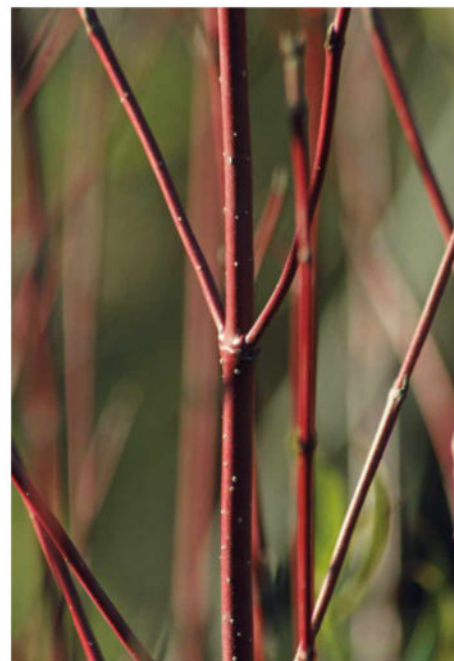


2 Aucuba foliage

The variegated foliage of this spotted laurel will add contrast to darker festive evergreens. Try using small sprigs tied in to your wreath, it will make a good backdrop for red glossy berries.

F April to May

H x S 3m x 3m



3 Dogwood stems

Prunings of winter stems like cornus are perfect for using in decorations because of their vibrant colour. Use short twigs to create stars (see p41) or wind the branches together to make a Christmas wreath base.

F May to June

H x S 3m x 3m

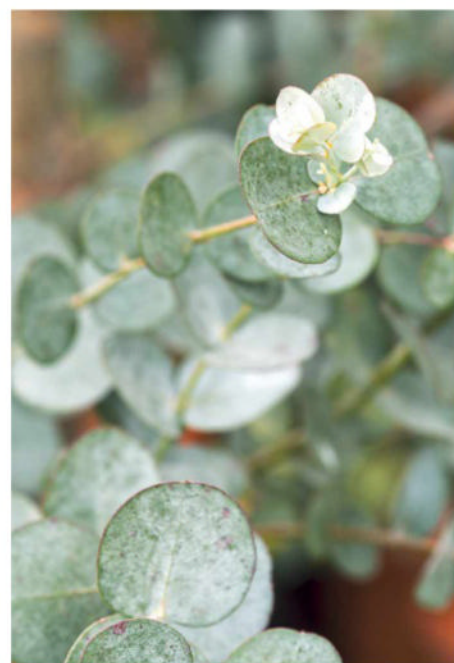


4 Clematis seedheads

The fluffy seedheads left from late-flowering summer clematis will add a different look to Christmas wreaths, adding a contrast in texture and making a change from traditional berries.

F July to September

H x S up to 8m x 2.5m



5 Eucalyptus

The silver green foliage of eucalyptus is a popular choice with florists for its colour and leaf shape. Add it to festive flower arrangements or use sprigs to lighten the colour scheme of a Christmas wreath.

F July to October

H x S 25m x 10m

6

Wintergreen

Gaultheria procumbens is the perfect festive plant for a container, with glossy foliage and bright berries. The berries also make a cheery addition to Christmas wreaths and decorations for the house.

F June to July

H x S 30cm x 1.5m



Mistletoe

You'll find this growing in the branches of trees such as apple and lime. As well as hanging it indoors, it looks pretty in wreaths. Make sure you have the landowner's permission before collecting it.

F April to May

H x S 1.1m x 1.1m



8 Fennel seedheads

These fennel seedheads are a great pick for adding to a natural, rustic looking wreath. Bronze fennel also adds interest throughout the year in borders, giving height with its feathery foliage and yellow flowers.

F July to August

H x S 1.8m x 1m



9 Hawthorn berries

Clusters of hawthorn berries make an attractive alternative to the usual holly berries for wreaths. Search along the hedgerows or, if you have space, it's an invaluable tree for wildlife and can be grown as a hedge.

F May

H x S 10m x 8m



10 Holly

One of the most versatile plants for decorating homes at Christmas – add sprigs above pictures and use berry-laden branches to brighten wreaths. Try variegated varieties for a more vibrant look.

F May to June

H x S up to 12m x 8m



11 Ivy fruit or leaves

Use green or variegated ivy to decorate mantelpieces, pictures and wreaths. This traditional favourite is incredibly versatile. Any black berries left on the plant could also be used to decorate a wreath.

F October to November

H x S 3m x 3m



12 Crab apples

These small fruits, which can be orange, yellow or red, ripen from October to November. Any fruit that hasn't been eaten by the birds will make a colourful addition to a wreath – tie them in with wire.

F May

H x S 8m x 6m



13 Pittosporum

Branches of this shrub, with its small evergreen leaves, make a good base layer for wreaths. Varieties such as 'Golf Ball' have fresh, light green foliage or try 'Tom Thumb' for its wavy purple leaves.

F May to June

H x S up to 4m x 2.5m



14 Physalis
Chinese lanterns look good for longer than almost any other dried seed pod and they keep their vibrant colour. Thread them like beads on to coloured reel wire and hang them on your tree or add to a wreath.
F July to August
H x S 75cm x 90cm



15 Pyracantha
Pyracantha berries can be red, yellow or orange and last for a long time on the plant. Cut a few clusters to brighten evergreen decorations, whether it's on mini wreaths or a swag across the mantelpiece.
F May
H x S 3m x 3m



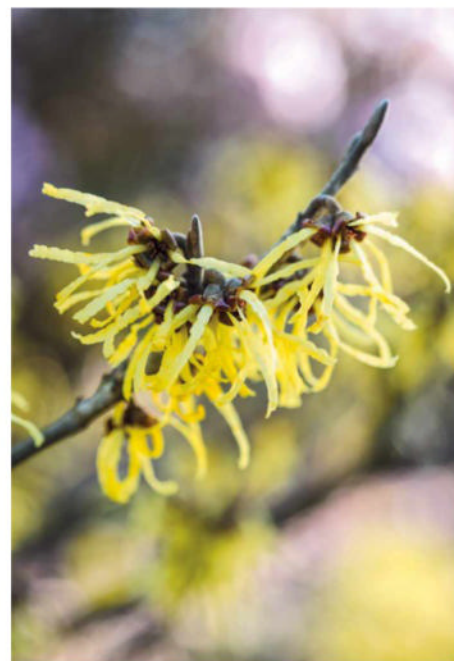
16 Rosehips
When you're out foraging, look out for plump rosehips that form on roses such as *Rosa rugosa*. Rosehips can be red, orange or even purple. Tie small bunches together to hang from your tree.
F June to September
H x S 1.5m x 1.5m



17 Viburnum berries
These shrubs not only add structure to your border but can be a great supply of winter berries, both for birds and your festive decorations. They can be black, white, red or even steely blue (*Viburnum davidii*).
F April to May
H x S 1.5m x 1.5m



18 Virginia creeper
Add scarlet shades to your wreath or house decorations, with trailing virginia creeper. It has fantastic autumn colour and makes a good base on a wreath as a contrast for evergreens such as holly and ivy.
F June to July
H x S 15m x 5m



19 Witch hazel
Add a zing to your festive displays with the yellow, scented flowers of witch hazel. Add branches to flower arrangements or tie the eye-catching flowers on to home-made wreaths.
F December to February
H x S 3m x 3m

20 Teasel

Use the dried seedheads of teasels to decorate your Christmas wreaths. The conelike flowerheads stand well in the border over winter and make easy pickings for festive decorations.

F June to August

H x S 2.5m x 1m







Decorating the house

Making your own natural festive decorations is much more satisfying than buying them and it's fun foraging for seasonal materials. Our gardens can offer up a surprising amount of greenery in winter, and keep your eyes peeled when you're out for a walk – but don't gather plants from protected sites. Look for ingredients that hold their shape as they dry out, so your decorations last. You can also buy dried flowers, berries and seedheads from florists. Many of the elements can be reused next year, making it a thrifty celebration, too.





Stair swag

A natural, climbing arrangement can add real wow to your staircase and hallway. And although it appears striking and opulent, this look is very easy to achieve. Any type of foliage, branches and blooms can be used, and if you include dried and long-lasting greenery, the display will stay looking great throughout the festive period.

We used

- Recycled food boxes or jars
- Chicken wire
- Moss from the garden
- Tape
- 'Mocha' amaryllis (Hippeastrum)
- Dried seedheads and foliage
- Dogwood stems
- Eucalyptus
- Conifers
- Hebes
- White tulips
- White hellebores

First create a base for the flowers and foliage. You can use any recycled shallow containers that will hold water. Fill them two-thirds full of damp moss, then cover the top third with scrunched chicken wire. Secure these in place with strong tape, criss-crossing it over the top. Position the tubs on the stairs, placing them carefully so they won't be in the way.

Next add the foliage. Start with the tallest stems and distribute them evenly - around two or three long stems per tub, standing them in the centre. Next, position medium-length stems of foliage either side. Lastly add the shorter, bushier sprigs to fill out the sides and drape over the edges to hide the containers as much as possible.

Follow the same process with the flowers. To keep the display fresh, top up the water in the containers if it runs low.



Spiced scent jar

Here's a simple way to fill your home with festive scents. Just before guests arrive, combine some cinnamon, bay, cloves, orange and sprigs of pine with water in a heavy-based pan and slowly bring to the boil. Transfer to glass jars to fill the air with spicy aromas.

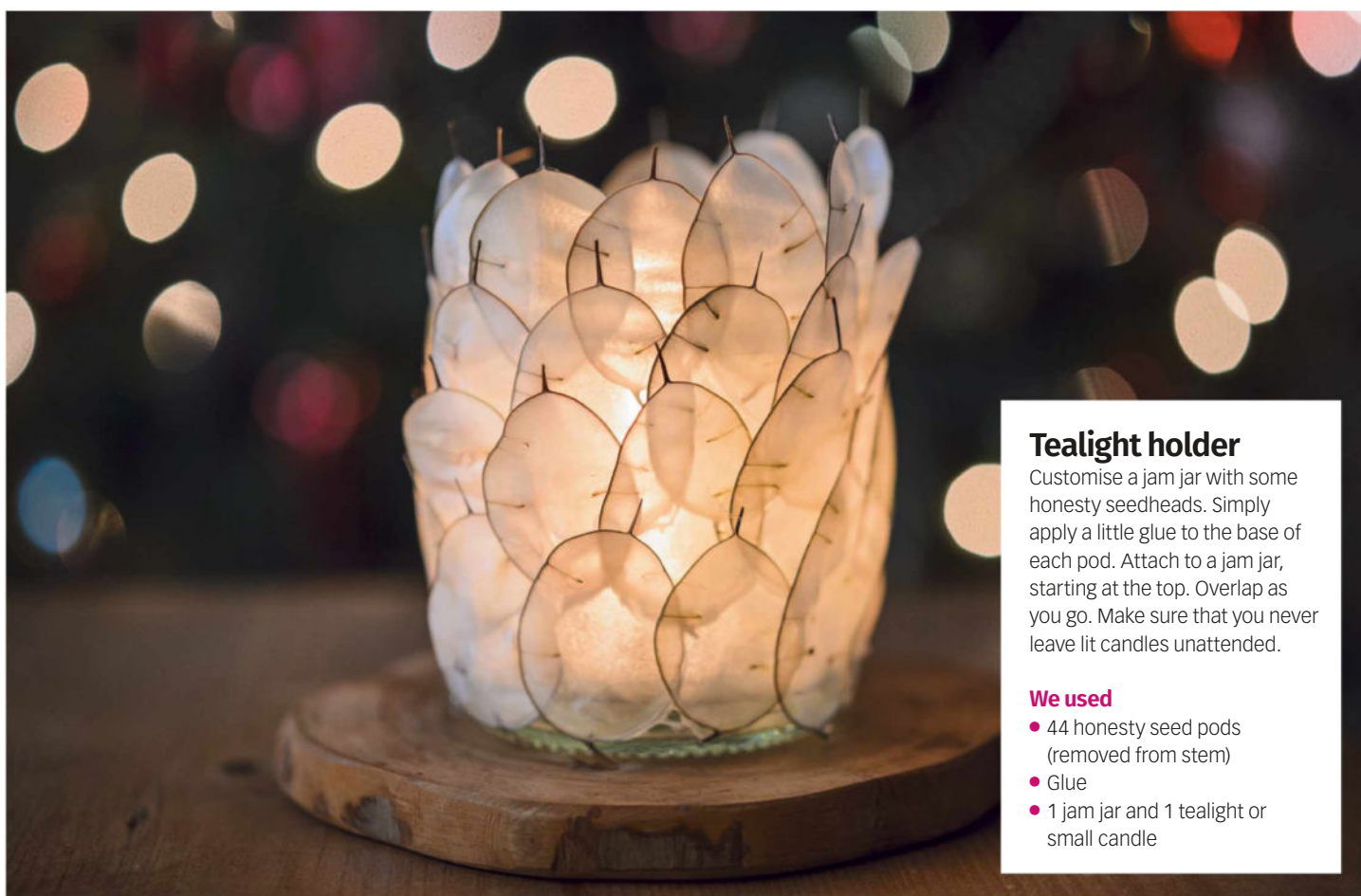


Mantel magic

Give your mantelpiece a fiery Christmas makeover by decorating it with swags of home-grown chillies. Wire the chillies to lengths of ivy and weave them through tealights in plain glass holders. The chillies and ivy will dry out over the Christmas period, which adds to their charm in low lighting.

We used

- Chillies
- Ivy strands
- Florist wire
- Tealights
- Glass tealight holders



Tealight holder

Customise a jam jar with some honesty seedheads. Simply apply a little glue to the base of each pod. Attach to a jam jar, starting at the top. Overlap as you go. Make sure that you never leave lit candles unattended.

We used

- 44 honesty seed pods (removed from stem)
- Glue
- 1 jam jar and 1 tealight or small candle



Door mini wreath

Decorate a door with a mini wreath (see p21 for method) hanging from thin ribbon. This adds a little burst of Christmas cheer in an unexpected place.

We used

- Vine, thin piece
- Florist wire
- Ribbon, thin piece
- Hops, dried
- Rosehips
- Conifers
- Thyme, dried



Alternative Christmas tree

Our twinkling, twiggy bundle looks delightfully ethereal, but most of the ingredients are easily accessible. The sky-blue hues and pin-point lights sprinkle it with Christmas magic. It's made out of hazel stems clasped together at the base, but cornus or willow would work well, too. Look for long, straight-ish branches from a tree or shrub that will appreciate the seasonal lopping. Shorten horizontal twigs to fit the available space.

We used

- Ribbon, wide and narrow
- Indoor fairy lights
- Rust-Oleum craft and hobby enamel spray paint (Tranquil Blue)
- Garden wire
- Walnuts
- Seedheads
- Fishing wire or cotton thread

Cut five to seven strong stems and tie them together firmly with strong wire, about 30cm from the base. Snip off any unwanted sideshoots. Below the wire, splay the stems out to make the tree stand up – it takes a little time. Textural details are a feature of this tree, so use a wide, wired satin ribbon to hide the wire tie, and narrow velvet ribbon to decorate the walnuts.

For the decorations – collect seedheads from plants such as alliums, poppies, eucalyptus and teasel from the garden, pine cones on walks or walnuts from nut selections. Spray paint them for extra colour. The alliums will balance on the branches. Hang the other seedheads, walnuts and pine cones from white cotton thread or fishing wire.

Mini wreaths

These mini wreaths are made from cornus and willow and can be hung up all around the house.

We used

- Cornus and willow twigs
- Garden wire
- Cotoneaster berries
- Beech nuts
- Cranberries
- Pine cones
- Ribbon

Select and shape several strands of pliable twigs to form an elegant circle. Secure with thin wire at the top to hold the shape.

Insert sprigs of cotoneaster and beech nuts. Make sure they're evenly spaced, although the overall look is meant to be a bit rustic. Tie a colourful ribbon at the top of the wreath, choosing a colour to contrast with the berries you've selected.

The examples below are simply wire circles threaded with cranberries or pine cones – they couldn't be easier to make.





Mistletoe swag

Bring a festive feel to tables, bookshelves or mantel pieces with this simple swag. It's easy to put together and makes good use of seasonal greenery.

We used

- Ribbon
- Green florist wire
- Twisted twine
- Mistletoe stems with berries
- Long lengths of ivy

Wrap ivy around the length of the twine. Gather three stems of mistletoe into a bunch and wire the bunch to the centre of the swag. Take single stems of mistletoe and wire them to the twine at intervals. Tie the ribbon around the mistletoe to cover the wire.



Pine cone star

This is so simple to make and something children can help with. String it up on cupboard or drawer knobs or use it as an extra tree decoration.

We used

- Red or green raffia
- 5 large pine cones
- Glue
- Cardboard
- 5 sprigs of fir
- 1 sprig of holly with berries

Glue the base of five cones together to form a star. Cut two circles of cardboard and glue in the centre of the star on each side. Wrap raffia around the star, between the cones. Leave long lengths to make a loop, then tie at the top in a bow. Glue the sprigs of fir onto the cardboard.

★
How to

Dress your table

On the festive dining table there's

rarely much room for flowers. Feasting platters and glasses rightly take up most of the space. So it's a good idea to have a slim container that sits neatly in the centre of the table, filled with a garden-style arrangement overflowing with foliage and blooms. Rather than traditional reds and greens, this arrangement has a warm, golden theme that works well with any gold accessories, woody tones and warm candlelight.

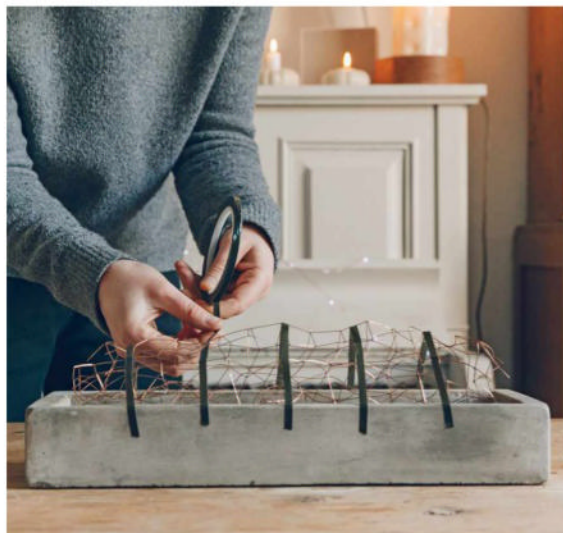
We used

- Concrete trough, 28cm long
- Chicken wire
- Strong adhesive
- Tape
- Mocha' amaryllis (hippeastrum)
- Dried seedheads and foliage
- White astrantias
- 'Golden Mustard' roses
- White tulips
- Conifers
- White hellebores



TOP TIP

Add a few taller stems at one side and on the opposite lower corner, some sprigs that drape over the edge. This gives a very natural asymmetrical look to the arrangement. Try to follow the shape already created by the foliage and dot the blooms evenly throughout the decoration.



1 Use a shallow container so that the height of the arrangement doesn't block people's view. Fill with slightly scrunched chicken wire and tape over the top to hold it in place. Fill it with water. Create the overall shape of the design with your foliage, placing each stem into the chicken wire, adding taller stems at one end.



2 Set the largest flowers in place first. Ensure they face outwards in every direction. Position some slightly recessed into the foliage and others protruding, to give a layered effect. Lastly, add the more delicate flowers and seedheads. Keep the water topped up and compost the plant material when you dismantle it.







Name card stands

Lichen-covered branches make interesting seasonal card holders. Just saw a slit in the top and insert the card. The bases can be kept and new name cards added for future parties.



Can do

This simple display will work perfectly on a table centre or sideboard. The utilitarian tin can creates an interesting contrast with the festive evergreens and glittery spangle of more elaborate decorations. Remove any labels from the can and make sure there's no sharp metal at the opening – a ring-pull can is best. Fill the can with water and pack it with sprigs from the garden. Search for holly, ivy and anything with berries. Complete the look with a pretty raffia bow.

We used

- Tin can
- Greenery and berries
- Raffia



Terracotta centrepiece

The trick to a successful centrepiece is to keep it small enough so that guests can still see each other across the table. Terracotta pots combined with foraged greenery and berries make the perfect partnership.

We used

- Terracotta pot and saucer
- Rice
- Candle
- Berries from pyracantha, cotoneaster and ivy
- Sprigs of yew
- Ivy leaves

Cover the hole at the bottom of a terracotta pot with a coin to prevent the rice from falling out. Hold a candle in the centre of the pot and fill with rice to 3cm from the top. Ensure the candle is straight and held firmly in place. Dress the top of the pot with foliage and berries to completely cover the rice. Decorate the saucer with ivy leaves.



Candle light

This project will transform a shop-bought candle into a beautiful table decoration. We used pine cones and plane tree seedheads, combined with physalis for a pop of colour, although you could use holly or any berries for an extra festive touch.



Herb napkin ring

These will smarten up your Christmas table. Make a circle with a rosemary stem and tie with florists' wire. Place it around your rolled napkin. Wrap the stems of a bay leaf, crab apples and a rosemary sprig with wire. Cover with ribbon and tuck it in.



Scented napkin

Elevate your festive table by making a little scented ring, which sits on each person's napkin. Simply shape a sprig of rosemary into a circle and tie with florist wire (around 0.35 thickness) then decorate with velvet ribbon.



Full of zest

Add a warm glow with these easy candle holders. Cut the top from an orange, scoop out the centre and add a tealight. The skin of the orange will dry out, making the holder more robust. Surround with holly or ivy to complete the festive scene.



Seedhead baubles



Easy tree decorations

Add a personal touch to Christmas decorations this year, with these easy-to-make projects. From painted acorns to stars made out of colourful twigs, these creative decorations make the most of materials foraged from outdoors. Don't worry if you don't have the exact materials to hand – follow our methods as inspiration and raid the garden for whatever is looking good. And why not get the kids involved – they'll love helping, plus we've got a couple of easy projects for younger gardeners to get involved with.



★
How to make

A seedhead bauble

This bauble is made from about 20 dried poppy seedheads. You could also try using dried helichrysum following exactly the same method – as we've done for the pink bauble in the image.

Using simple ingredients from the garden, you can create a decoration with sparkly festive appeal. This one is a bit more fiddly than some projects so kids may need a bit of help.

We used

- Gold spray paint
- Papier mâché ball, 5cm diameter
- Dried poppy seedheads (or dried helichrysum)
- Festive ribbon
- Glue gun



1 Spray paint the papier mâché ball and the poppy seedheads in gold. Leave them to dry. Remove the hanging loop once the ball is dry.



2 Take a 20cm length of festive ribbon and fold it in half to make a loop. Check it fits over a branch. Use a glue gun to stick the ends to the top of the ball.



3 Remove the stem close to the base of the poppy pod. Apply glue, and stick the pod to the ball. Continue sticking on poppy seedheads until the ball is covered.

★
How to make

An acorn decoration

Little acorns can have a big

impact when hung in a group and brightened up with a coat of paint. For extra glamour, add glitter and sparkling stick-on gems. Collect your acorns as early as you can in the festive season, because they will be harder to find nearer to Christmas. Conkers would make a good alternative to acorns.

We used

- Acorns
- Acrylic matte paint
- Wooden kebab skewer
- Adhesive foam pads
- PVA Glue
- Sewing needle
- 3 ply chunky string
- Butcher's twine



1 Stick a foam pad to the top of the acorn and then attach the blunt end of the wooden skewer to the other side of the pad. Dip the acorn into the pot of paint, about halfway up.



2 Cut a 15cm length of chunky string. Glue along one side and curl it into a flat circle. Once the paint on the acorn has dried, attach the circle of string to the top of the acorn with PVA glue.



3 Thread a 15cm length of butcher's twine through the string. Repeat steps 1-3 with two other acorns. Join the acorns by plaiting the twine and make a loop at the top to hang on the tree.



Cinnamon sticks

Cinnamon sticks

Decorate your tree naturally with bundles of cinnamon sticks tied together with wire. Tie ribbon over the top to hide the wire and hang the sticks from a branch. Or for a home-grown edible idea, try threading vibrant physalis seed pods onto wire to hang from your tree.



Natural tree decoration

Stored somewhere dry, this can be used again next year. Make a circle using a thin piece of vine, attach materials to it with wire, and hang it using ribbon. We used asparagus fern, dried grasses (such as miscanthus), rosehips and dried thyme but use any material from your garden.



*Natural tree
decoration*



Bespoke baubles



Twiggy bundle

Twiggy bundle

Cut a small bundle of twigs to the same length. Try bright and vibrant cornus stems or hazel twigs. Tie them together in the middle with a raffia bow and make a loop to hang them from. This rustic decoration will take no time to make and can be made from any attractive twigs you can find.



Bespoke baubles

Create baubles with a difference by filling your own with greenery and berries from the garden.

This clever idea produces a traditional tree decoration, with the scope to add a personal touch and change the look each year. The baubles could also be filled with seedheads or dried flowers.

You should be able to find clear glass baubles in most craft shops.



Go nuts

Nuts of all shapes and sizes make simple, festive decorations. Tie raffia around the nuts (as you would tie it around a present) so that the ribbon supports the nut at the bottom. Use the excess ribbon to make a loop to hang on the Christmas tree.



Pine cone bauble

Collect some pine cones and leave them in a warm, dry place indoors to encourage them to open up. Then weave some thick, colourful wool in among the open layers. Finish with a dab of coloured glitter glue on the tips. This is a fun, easy project for kids to help with.



Pine cone bauble



Twinkle twigs



Look to the stars

Give starry sparkle to Christmas trees and festive branches with these Scandinavian-style decorations. The birch bark adds a light, simple finish, although you could use colourful leaves instead. Simply draw a star on a strip of bark, glue it to a piece of thick cardboard and cut it out – it's as easy as that. Punch a hole through the star and hang it with garden wire or twine.



Twinkle twigs

You can't beat this star decoration for rustic charm. Simply cut 8-10cm lengths of colourful twigs (cornus and hazel are ideal), and bind them together with garden string to make a star. Use wire to bind twigs together if yours are very flimsy, and use a string loop for hanging. Add a dusting of gold or silver spray paint if you'd like to give the stars some festive zing.



Potted charm

Potted charm

Tie a length of raffia round a large nut or marble, then thread it through the hole in a tiny terracotta pot. Create a hanging loop and finish with a raffia bow on the rim.



Clothes peg star

Remove the metal clasps from five pegs and glue the straight edges together to form a point. Repeat to make five points then glue the five ends together. Decorate with dogwood stems and a cedar bud.



Clothes peg star



Children's makes

Pine cone reindeers

This cute reindeer decoration

ticks a number of boxes for keeping the kids busy over the holidays. From taking them on woodland walks to forage for pine cones and twigs, to sorting them and assembling them once back at home – there's plenty to spark their imaginations and create a herd of Rudolphins.

We used

- Pine cones
- Twigs
- A pack of self-adhesive googly eyes
- A pack of red pom poms
- PVA glue
- Paint brush
- Cotton/ribbon
- Scissors
- Festive ribbon
- Glue gun



1 Take your pine cone and attach a pom pom 'nose' and a pair of googly eyes using glue. If you've found different types of cone, have a go at identifying them – there are lots of helpful sites online.



2 Cut two twigs to 10cm in length. Forked twigs create more dramatic antlers, but single stemmed twigs will also work well. Again, see if you can identify which tree they are from. Secure with glue.



3 Once the glue has dried, take a length of cotton and tie around the antler end of the pine cone. Tie in a knot, ready to hang on your Christmas tree. Or use wire and attach them to a reindeer-themed wreath.

★
Children's makes

Bird seed decorations

Encourage the kids to be wildlife

warriors this winter by making decorations that double as a tasty treat for your feathered friends. They are easy to make and you can even tailor them to the bird you'd most like to attract by using their favourite seed.

We used

- 4 cups of bird seed
- 1 pack of gelatine
- 3/4 cups of flour
- 3 tbsp corn syrup or lard
- Mixing bowl and spoon
- Non-stick mould or cookie cutters
- Spray cooking oil
- Bamboo skewers
- Ribbon or twine



1 Melt the gelatine in a pan of warm water, stirring until dissolved. Remove from the heat and mix into flour, corn syrup and bird seed, making sure all the seed is evenly coated.



2 Spray the moulds or cookie cutters with cooking oil. Spoon in the bird seed mixture and pat it down firmly with the back of a spoon. Push a skewer into the middle, to give birds something to perch on.



3 Put the mixture in the fridge for 24 hours to chill and set, then remove from the moulds. Tie twine around the outside of the decoration and hang from the branches of a tree in the garden.



Present wreath



Make your own gifts

Christmas can be expensive but with a little time and thought you can create beautiful, thrifty presents that will share your love of gardening with family and friends.

From making your own tealight holders or chutney to creating a terrarium or growing a cactus from offsets, we have plenty of inspiring ideas for you to try. If you have time to start in advance, you could try forcing an amaryllis or making a kokedama. Sharing your love of gardening with family and friends will make the festive shopping season a far more enjoyable experience.





Present wreath

Decorating a present with a mini wreath adds a personal touch. We wrapped the gift in recycled fabric then tied it with twine, before tying on the wreath. We made it by tying a piece of vine into a circle. Secure it with wire then attach greenery such as juniper, conifer sprigs and cypress.

We used

- A piece of vine
- Conifer sprigs
 - Juniper
 - Cypress
- Dried thyme



Gift a terrarium

A bottle garden won't break the bank and can be as complex or as simple as you choose. This traditional looking bottle is filled with shade-tolerant houseplants to create a lush display that suits a bright spot out of direct sunlight.

We used

- Vintage glass bottle
 - Grit
- Leafy houseplants, such as peace lily (back), caladium (left), fittonia (front)
- Moss (from the lawn)

Make it

Put 5cm of horticultural grit in the bottom of the bottle for drainage. Add houseplant compost until the bottle is about a third full, breaking up any lumps with your hands.

Position the plants one at a time, planting them as you would in a container. Firm the compost around them. Fill gaps between the plants with a layer of moss.

Water sparingly down the sides of the bottle as the curved sides will prevent a lot of evaporation. Ensure the compost doesn't dry out or get saturated.





Kick-start a cactus

Many cacti form offsets at the base, which can each become a new plant. Why not kick-start your child's collection or give one away to one of their friends?

Make it

Using a sharp, clean knife wiped with alcohol, slice the plantlets from the parent plant at a 45° angle and set to one side for a few days until the cut callouses over. Replant in a gritty compost. Then wait a few days before you water. Provide instructions to 'water sparingly' and 'keep in a warm, light place'. Child's play!



Steep herbs in vinegar

Give the gift of a New Year detox! Flavour vinegar with herbs and you've got a simple but tasty dressing to drizzle over winter salads.

Make it

Half fill a clean glass container with fresh herbs such as rosemary, thyme, tarragon or oregano, and fill with warmed wine vinegar. Leave for two weeks to infuse, then sieve the mixture through a piece of muslin cloth. Bottle the clean liquid and add fresh herbs, making sure they are fully submerged. Label festively.





Grow an amaryllis

Amaryllis bulbs take around seven weeks to flower, so plant them in advance to rival the most flamboyant Christmas tree.

Make it

Pot up in compost, with two-thirds of the bulb above the surface. Or, submerge the roots in a glass vase filled with decorative pebbles and keep topped up with water to just below the base of the bulb. Position in a warm, light place, turning regularly to get even growth. Stake if necessary.



Preserve your windfalls

Scoop up that end-of-season produce before it turns to mush. Tomatoes, pumpkins and windfall apples all make tasty base ingredients.

Make it

Select your cutest jam jars and search for chutney recipes that include exotic festive flavours such as cinnamon, dates and ginger. Chutney takes around two weeks to mature and should keep for at least a couple of years. The perfect present for teachers, neighbours and friends.





Pot up a winter-flowering plant

Create a quick and low-cost gift that's guaranteed to bring a smile to any garden-lover's face. It's a great present to take to a party, too. We've used a hellebore but winter violas and heathers would look just as good. If you wanted to be more elaborate you could plant a larger pot, but a single plant in a terracotta pot looks just as striking as something bigger.

Make it

Pick a pot that is the right size for your chosen plant(s) and has holes for drainage in the bottom, too. Part-fill with a peat-free multi-purpose compost, mixed with a little composted bark, topsoil and grit. Then position your plant so that it sits just below the top of your pot. Add more compost to fill any gaps and give the pot a good tap to level everything out. To make the potted plant feel like a special gift, add a raffia bow instead of wrapping.



Make birch tealights

These tealight holders make great presents. Made from prunings of birch branches (tree surgeons and woodland trusts are a good source), their chalk-white bark decorated with ribbon has a home-spun charm.

Make it

Clamp a birch log firmly into a work bench and saw it into slices between 8-20cm long. Using the jaws of the work bench to hold each log piece firmly, drill holes for the candles just larger than a tea light, using a 40mm wood drill bit. We positioned ours off-centre, following the growth rings in the wood. Wrap and pin some ribbon around the bases of the the wood to give a bit of extra colour and load with tea lights.



TOP TIP

Use moss gathered from the garden to hide the soil and give a more finished look to your potted present



★ *How to make* A kokedama

This is Japan's answer to the hanging basket, a kokedama. It's deceptively simple to achieve and makes a great value Christmas gift. The word kokedama translates as 'moss ball' and in Japan it's also known as 'poor man's bonsai' or 'string garden'. The rootballs of small plants are wrapped in moss and hung up for decoration.

A home-made kokedama makes an original and welcome present. With Christmas coming up there are plenty of seasonal plants, such as violas or hellebores that will work nicely and if cared for, they will last far longer than a bunch of flowers, too.



1 Mix equal parts multi-purpose compost and bonsai compost. If you can't get the latter, mix 2 parts sharp sand, 4 parts multi-purpose compost, 1 part John Innes No.3. As you mix, keep adding water until it is the consistency of wet cake mix.



2 Take a large handful of the compost and form it into a ball, squeezing out excess water till it holds together well. Divide the ball into two halves with a simple twist. Take the ivy out of its pot and gently remove the compost around its roots with your fingers.



3 Place the ivy between your two compost halves and reform the ball around the plant. You may need an extra pair of hands for this step. Plug any gaps with some leftover compost.



4 Lay some moss on a table, place the ball in the centre and wrap the moss around it. This can be fiddly and you may need quite a bit of moss to make sure the ball is covered.



5 Tie garden string round the circumference and knot it, then wind ribbon or string around the ball till the moss is held firmly in place. Leave a long length of the ribbon or string to hang it by.



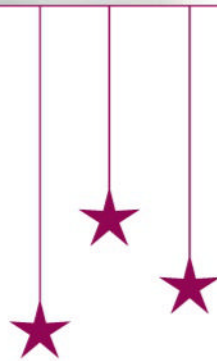
Kokedama

Place your moss ball out of direct sunlight. To water, dunk it in a bucket of tap water, let it soak and hang it up to dry.

We used

- One pot-grown ivy
- Moss from the garden
- Bonsai compost
- Multi-purpose compost
- Garden twine or thin ribbon
- Scissors
- Trug, or large saucer, for mixing compost





Make your own wreaths

Nothing says, 'Come in and have a glass of something and a mince pie', better than a Christmas wreath – a cheery signal of seasonal celebration. Making your own is no more taxing than wrapping the presents and all you need are materials and ingredients that you can find at home in your own garden. There is an abundance of plant material out there at this time of year that's perfect for the job, from the bright red berries of hawthorn and pyracantha to the tawny hues of last summer's buddleia and sedum seedheads.



★
How to make

Wreaths using a birch base

Homemade birch twig hoops

make a great base for wreaths – birch stems are strong and supple, and it's easy to insert decorative material in the gaps. They can easily be found, just be sure to ask the land owners' permission and only take what you need. Alternatively, source from a florist.

Borrowing from the beauty of the winter hedgerow is a tradition going back millennia, so look at what nature has provided – the hard work has been done for you. Arrange your plunder to create a full and luxurious effect – the more the merrier!



1 Lay two or three 80cm birch twigs lengthways and twist them around each other. Add more twigs, avoiding the very whippy growth towards the ends.



2 Once you have the right length and thickness for your wreath, tie the birch twigs into a circle with wire. This will form the base of your wreath.



3 Attach a hoop of wire or string for hanging the wreath. This is best done now, because it's harder to do when you've completed the wreath.



4 Arrange your foliage base layer, building it up thickly by sticking it into the twigs. You might need to secure the foliage with floristry wire or string.



5 Embellish with decorative material such as sprays of berries or cones, either pushing them into the twigs or securing with wire where necessary.



Feed the birds

Hang this wreath in the garden to provide a snack for visiting birds. We covered a birch twig hoop with ivy, then added pyracantha and hawthorn berries, plus crab apples attached with a twist of wire pierced through their middle. Hang your wreath where you can see it and watch for hungry birds attracted by the bright fruits.

We used

- Crab apples
- Ivy
- Hawthorn
- Mistletoe
- Pyracantha



Razzle dazzle



Razzle dazzle

Gathering twigs and sprigs from hedgerows for your wreath can become a Christmas tradition, and it's not just holly and ivy that are worth bringing home. Birch is a brilliant building block for a wreath, especially long spindly stems that are often blown from the tree by winter winds. Deep, mulled-wine red, they're an easy-to-bend backdrop for other hedgerow harvests, such as silvery green Scots pine and clematis seedheads, as fluffy and soft as Santa's beard. The silver hearts add a touch of bling – a nice and shiny contrast to all the natural materials.

We used

- 10-15 x 90cm-long thin birch twigs
- 5 x silver heart or bauble decorations
- Garden twine
- A few sprigs of Scots pine and cones
- 5 x fluffy heads of old man's beard (clematis seedheads)

From the hedgerow

If you don't have time to make your own hoop, source a birch twig hoop from a florist or online. This wreath has a natural look and can be embellished with any greenery and berries you can find. We used an abundance of yew, box and ivy as a base on the birch hoop and then added hips from a wild rose for a splash of colour. The lichen-encrusted elder twigs add highlights to the deep bottle green of the base material.

We used

- Birch twig hoop
- Lichen-covered elder twigs
- Box
- Ivy
- Wild rose hips
- Yew



From the hedgerow



Foraged & fabulous

Foraged and fabulous

In the depths of winter, fresh greenery gathered from the garden lifts your spirits and reconnects you with nature like nothing else. Combined with a profusion of gold, it really brings the festive season alive. Half the pine cones are sprayed gold, while the sea holly has been sprayed blue. Lay moss over the bottom half of the birch base. Bind it in place with reel wire. Spray this to keep it moist. Wire small bunches of foliage on to the moss with reel wire. Attach the pine cones using the stub wire.

We used

- Birch twig base
- Reel wire
- Spray paint (gold and blue)
- Florist's stub wire
- Moss from the garden
- A mix of blue pine, douglas fir, viburnum with berries, rosemary, sea holly, olive and eucalyptus
- Various pine cones
- Twigs with lichen



Virtuous circle

This wreath is a break from tradition, made entirely from seedheads and dried leaves. There is plenty out there to experiment with and if you want a bit of colour, add some ribbon or get creative with spray paint. Starting with a birch twig hoop we pushed through stems of buddleia and sedum then added dried leaves to build up the base layer. Seedheads of poppy, fennel and golden rod completed the wreath.

We used

- Birch twig hoop
- Dried leaves
- Seedheads of buddleia, fennel, golden rod, poppy and sedum



★
How to make

Wreaths using a vine ring

You can make all of the wreaths

on the next couple of pages using the same basic technique, just add different decorative elements. We've used lengths of dried vine as the base for these wreaths, as an eco-friendly alternative to florist's foam. They're easy to bend into shape – soak the vines in a bucket of water for a few hours before you start construction, to stop them snapping when you bend them. If you can't find dried vine, you can buy ready-made vine wreath bases from florists or online.



1 Bend the vine into a circle to work out the size you want, then cut to length; 1-1.5m makes a good size wreath. Twist the vine around itself once or twice to give it a circular shape. Using a reel of wire, tie the vine together. Do not cut the wire – keep it on the reel.



2 Take a bunch of plant material and place it over the tied wire. Wrap the wire tightly around the bunch to secure it to the wreath. Add another bunch, pointing in the same direction as the first one, covering the tied end of the first bunch. Secure in the same way.



3 Keep adding bunches of material, from foliage to berries, seedheads or flowers around your base until you are happy with how full your wreath is. When you have finished adding bunches, cut the wire off the reel and tie it off.



4 Add fresh flowers. To keep them fresher for longer, we used reusable floral water tubes. Fill the tubes with water and place your flowers into them. Then poke in the tubes at an angle or secure them with wire. Change the flowers in the tubes as often as you need to.



5 Add other decorations such as festive baubles or fruits. You can use a glue gun to stick lightweight decorations onto your wreath or use wire to tie heavier items onto the base of the wreath. Secure a fabric bow with wire to add the finishing touch.



Rich and bountiful

This wreath has an eye-catching colour palette and is made with fresh and dried materials, plus some fruit for pops of colour.

We used

- Grape vine
- Mix of foraged branches
- Ageratum, yellow, dried
- Chamomile, dried
- Hellebores
- Honesty, dried
- Hops, dried
- Mangosteens
- Ornamental grasses, dried
- Scots pine
- Tangerines
- Teasels
- Thyme, dried



On the vine



On the vine

This gorgeous twiggy wreath is our inspiration to you to get outside and forage. Experiment with seedheads, fir cones and berries, and garnish with dried flowerheads. Search parks and hedgerows for mossy bark, catkins and bead-like rosehips (though never take too much from any one place). Nature can provide joyous colour at this time of year, but reach for the spray can for a helping hand. After making the wreath base use a light touch to allow the natural structure to show through.

We used

- Fine florist wire
- Vine stems or other woody stems
- Lichen-covered twigs
- Rosehips, mistletoe, catkins
- Variegated ivy
- Dried eryngium flowerheads
- Fir cones
- Allium and teasel seedheads

Wild & natural

We created a traditional green base for this wreath, using a mix of festive foliage. Then we added a touch of glamour with fresh flowers picked from the garden – these are kept fresh in reusable plastic water tubes.

We used

- Vine
- Roll of florist wire
- Reusable plastic water tubes
- Conifer sprigs, such as juniper and Lawson cypress
- Heather
- Hellebores
- Ivy, with berries
- Ornamental grasses such as *Miscanthus* 'Flamingo', dried
- Rosemary
- Thyme, dried



Wild & natural

★
How to make

Wreaths using willow rings

Using a willow ring will guarantee the base structure is sturdy enough to support heavy decorative ingredients, while also being an attractive object in itself. The pink and orange shades on this wreath are great foils for the greens, with the raffia bow at the top picking up the rosier hues. Try alternative shades from other fruit and veg, such as chilli peppers and crab apples, which have strong, bright colours and will last well outdoors.



1 Fold a handful of raffia in two. Wrap it around the willow ring and pull the ends through the loop, as shown. This indicates the top of the wreath.



2 Use a skewer to spear a sprout near its base. Thread a 30cm-long wire through the hole to give two 'legs' for attaching it to the wreath. Repeat for each one.



3 Fasten lengths of wire to all the ingredients, by either skewering them or winding wire round the stalks. The wires can be trimmed later.



4 Attach ingredients to the frame, starting with the sprouts. Fix snugly together with no wire showing. Finish with bay sprigs using more wire.



5 Fix the sprouts and shallots firmly, but don't pull the wire too tightly or they may fall apart. Distribute the other ingredients evenly around the ring.



More sprouts?

Here's the perfect way to introduce reluctant kids to Brussels sprouts. This wreath isn't a quick 5-minute make, but will raise a chuckle from your seasonal visitors!

We used

- 25cm willow ring
- Fine florist wire – approx. 7m
- Metal skewer
- Raffia
- Shallots x 6
- Brussels sprouts x 35
- Physalis x 8
- Mini bell peppers x 2
- Tied sprigs of bay leaves



Keeping it traditional



Keeping it traditional

This classic wreath is made using sprigs of fir, attached to the base with wire. We've kept it simple and decorated it using small crab apples and holly berries for a splash of seasonal colour. Tie a cluster of crab apples to the wreath by wrapping the wire around their stalks. Using a variegated form of holly helps it to stand out against the darker background.

We used

- Sprigs of fir
- Green florist wire
- Crab apples with stalks attached
- Larch stems with cones attached
- Stems of variegated holly with berries attached

Rosy glow

This red-hot wreath is full of festive fire with a base of willow and dogwood stems. Plants such as skimmia, holly and pyracantha bring everything alive with their glossy berries. Give it a boost with any foliage you like the look of. We used heavenly bamboo (*Nandina domestica*) and *Mahonia japonica*. Secure each layer with binding wire as you go. Attach the berries by winding stub wire around their stems, leaving the two wire ends sticking out. Push these through the woven stems of the leaf arrangement and twist at the back.

We used

- Willow and dogwood stem base
- Florist wire
- Stub wire
- Leaves of dried grasses such as *Carex testacea*
- Heavenly bamboo with winter colour
- Beech with dried leaves
- Pyracantha sprigs with berries
- Holly with berries
- *Mahonia japonica*
- *Skimmia japonica* with berries



Rosy glow

★
How to make

Wreaths using a metal ring

A flat metal ring makes a good

alternative to a base made from branches or stems. It's light but can hold a lot of materials. The best way to attach foliage to these rings is with binding wire. Create a base on the ring using materials such as sprigs of foliage or moss from the garden. Moss is a good option for wreaths that incorporate living plants such as sempervivums (see p74).



White Christmas

This chic wreath uses foraged material attached to a flat wire wreath frame. You can try and find the materials we used or use whatever you can find in the garden. These are simply suggestions of foliage, twigs and seedheads that will look striking for your festive creation.

We used

- Flat wire wreath frame (30cm diameter)
- Florist wire
- Stub wire
- Small can of hairspray
- Strips of birch bark
- Lichen covered oak twigs
- Mistletoe
- Ash twigs
- Sprigs of *Gaultheria mucronata* 'Snow White'
- White heather (*Calluna vulgaris*)
- Sprigs of variegated pittosporum
- Old man's beard with seedheads
- Cushion bush (*leucophyta*)
- Eucalyptus

1 Fix alternate sprigs of pittosporum and eucalyptus to the wreath frame with binding wire. Face them in the same direction and overlap each sprig to cover the base of the previous one, until the frame is covered.



3 Apply hairspray to the old man's beard seedheads to stop them drooping. Attach with florist wire.

2 Wrap stub wire round small clusters of all the other materials. Leave the two ends of the wire sticking out, push them through the foliage-covered frame and twist them at the back to secure.



4 Wire spiral strips of birch bark to the wreath base. Twist a wire loop to the top of the frame to hang it up.





Good enough to eat

Anticipate the feast to come by displaying Christmas ingredients on your wreath. It's all the better if they've been grown on your plot! You can hang it in the kitchen or place it on the table – then gradually dismantle it as you use up the ingredients in your festive dishes. Start by covering the ring with moss, attaching it with wire, then add a layer of evergreen herbs. Mount shallots, garlic, figs, cinnamon sticks, chillies and mulled wine sachets onto twists of garden wire and push into the moss.

We used

- Flat metal ring
- Florist wire
- Moss
- Mulled wine sachets
- Cinnamon sticks
- Chillies
- Evergreen herbs: sage, rosemary, bay
- Figs
- Garlic
- Shallots

Seasonal classic

For this wreath, we used many different variegated materials, from the blousy ornamental cabbage to an ivy-leaved geranium sprig, to give the feeling of frost-dusted foliage. We also aimed for a good range of leaf size and texture, from neat and spiky, to floppy and broad. We've added red crab apples for extra colour. Seek out bright berries where you can for the festive finishing touch.

We used

- Flat metal ring
- Fine and stiff florist wire
- Holly
- Variegated evergreens
- Holly berries
- Crab apples
- Ornamental cabbage



Seasonal classic



Living wreath



TOP TIP

To keep the foliage fresh, squirt water onto the moss base daily.

Living wreath

This wreath is the ultimate plant-lovers' choice – a living wreath with a selection of sedums and sempervivums growing on a bed of moss. Dampen the moss, then attach rolls of it to the wreath using wire, wrapped through and around the frame. Flatten the rootball of each plant and use wire to attach to the frame. You don't have to stick to this list of plants – there are many varieties of succulents that would work just as well.

We used

- Flat wire wreath frame, 30cm
- Florist binding wire, 0.5mm
- 15-20 handfuls of fresh moss from the garden
- *Sedum spurium*
- *Sedum spathulifolium* 'Cape Blanco'
- *Sempervivum ruthenicum* hybrid
- *Sedum pachyphyllum*
- *Sedum hispanicum* 'Blue Carpet'
- *Sedum reflexum* 'Yellow Cushion'



Naturally festive

When making winter wreaths, look for unusual and interesting ingredients – seedheads, cones and lichen-clad twigs. This one is rich and decadent and a wonderful welcome to the home. A celebration of winter's beauty and nature's life cycles.

We used

- Metal wreath frame
- Moss
- Roll of florist wire
- Small twigs
- Crab apples
- Privet berries
- Viburnum berries
- Ivy berries
- Pyracantha berries
- Dried eryngium flowers
- Skimmia berries
- Waxflowers (chamaleucium)
- Holly berries



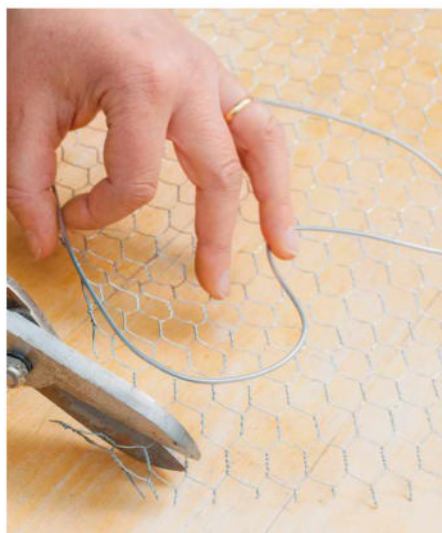
Naturally festive

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How to make

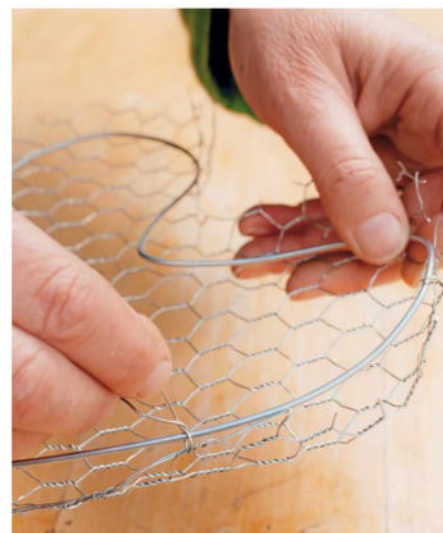
Alternative wreaths

If you fancy trying something a bit different, why not go for an exciting alternative decoration for your door?

Christmas decorations can be expensive and are usually made from non-recyclable materials that end up in landfill. But it needn't be that way. We've made these decorations for your door and tree using prunings from the garden. Most of the materials can also be composted when the festivities are over, so little goes to waste. Of course, there's no need to scrimp on style.



1 Cut an 80cm length of galvanised wire, and bend it into a heart shape, joining the ends at the bottom. Make another to match. Using the wire heart as a template, cut two larger heart shapes out of chicken wire (roughly 15mm wider all the way round).



2 Use short twists of fuse wire to tie the heart-shaped wire outline to the chicken wire. Secure the fuse wire at regular intervals along the heart-shaped outline, moulding it into a shallow 3D pillow as you go. Repeat for the second wire heart.



3 Tuck any sharp edges of chicken wire out of the way with pliers, then give both hearts two coats of emulsion paint, allowing the first coat to dry properly in between. When the second coat is dry, bind the hearts at one side with fuse wire.



4 Fill the open heart with a selection of foraged goodies. Put the most delicate objects at the top. They should stay fresh through the festive season and any spoiled material can be removed by opening up the pillow if necessary.



5 Close and secure the edges of the heart with fuse wire. Attach a bunch of dried chillies or seedheads to the front with raffia to provide the finishing touch. Tie a length of raffia to the top of the heart and hang it on a nail attached to your door.



Heart-felt welcome

This heart-shaped pillow, stuffed with the finest of foraged treasures, is a fresh twist on the traditional Christmas door wreath and can be reused.

We used

- 2 x 30cm squares of 13mm-gauge chicken wire
- Cream emulsion tester pot
- 2m of galvanised garden wire
- Around 1m of raffia
- Around 50cm of fuse wire
- Wire cutters
- Pliers
- Paint brush
- Dried fruits, flowers, seedheads



Follow that star

Holly and ivy have been used for this traditional door decoration that we've brought right up to date. The materials can all be foraged from the garden or hedgerows, although the arrangement takes a little care to assemble.

We used a natural branch star frame as the base, sourced from a craft shop. Attach foliage to the frame using garden twine or thin wire, pointing some foliage inwards to cover the holes in the frame. Gradually build up the foliage before adding decorations such as berries or ivy flowers. Step back and check the decoration from a distance, then substitute sprigs or prune to shape it. Hang the star using fishing line.

We used

- Natural branch star frame or make your own version with branches
- Kitchen knife
- Garden twine
- Secateurs
- Fishing line (8lb line)
- Holly with berries
- Flowering ivy

All tied up

This natural door hanging looks so festive, but couldn't be easier to create. Inspired by florists' tied bunches, this is simply a twist of greenery, berries and twigs tied together with raffia and hung with a length of fishing line.

Choose a flat, sturdy branch for the base of the arrangement (a Christmas tree branch is ideal because it's sturdy and provides a good evergreen base), then add shorter, more decorative foliage on top. Holly, flowering ivy and twisted willow are ideal, although any evergreen sprigs from the garden will work just as well. Select your evergreen materials, looking for a good mix of shapes, colours and textures.

Build the display a sprig at a time. Tie with raffia, trim, then hang with some fishing line.

We used

- A Christmas tree branch
- Twigs (we used willow)
- Secateurs
- Raffia
- Fishing line (8lb line)
- Holly with berries
- Flowering ivy



all tied up





Festive containers

For an easy way to make an impact this Christmas, fill pots and window boxes with festive-inspired planting. These displays will instantly brighten up entrances and also provide colour and interest over the whole season. And festive pots aren't just for Christmas – these plants will give pleasure for months or even years to come. After Christmas, remove the twinkling bits, then replant the shrubs in your borders. Most of the plants are widely available, but there's no need to stick to the exact varieties – just choose something that looks similar.



★
How to

Plant a Christmas pot

There are plenty of exciting

winter plants that will add some festive cheer to pots. It's a great time of year to do something a little bit different and create a pot that really plays with leaf shape, size and texture. And if you're looking for a special gift idea a winter pot would work well.

Place your plants first so you can play around with their positions and spacing before planting. Start with the biggest plant and then work down to the smaller plants. When you're happy with the positioning you can get planting.

Finally, position your pot in a spot where you will be able to enjoy it everyday. Don't forget to water your container to settle the compost once it's planted and help keep plants in good health by watering each time the compost dries out in winter winds.



TOP TIP

There is something about the twinkle of lights that makes Christmas magical, and putting lights in the garden is an easy way to make it feel festive. They create a focal point when looking out of the windows. There's a huge range of outdoor lights available and lots are battery and solar-powered, so you don't need to worry about running electricity into the garden.



1 Ensure that your pot has adequate drainage holes and check that they aren't blocked up. Half fill the pot with peat-free multi-purpose compost and mix in some slow-release fertiliser.



2 Position the holly in the centre of the pot, making sure it is straight, and add more compost, firming the plant in well. For other container recipes, plant the tallest or largest plant in the centre.



3 Plant the grasses around the edge of the container ensuring they are evenly spaced apart. Add the skimmia in between, backfill with compost and water thoroughly.



4 Decorate your container with some fairy lights. We strung red, battery-powered ones through the holly, hiding the battery pack among the plants.



Berry bright

This container display is an explosion of evergreen plants for those who like things to have an informal touch. With a traditional holly bush at the centre, and red berry lights to give a bit of sparkle, it couldn't be more festive. It's possible to plant the skimmias and grasses in the garden when they outgrow the display.

We used

- 1 x *Ilex aquifolium*
- 3 x *Nassella tenuissima* 'Pony Tails'
- 3 x *Skimmia japonica*
- 30cm terracotta pot
- Red outdoor berry lights

Formally festive

The perfect symmetry of this scene is ideal for a formal display and easy to recreate at home. The box cones are an investment, but will look good all year round. The display is perfect for a front door and you can easily replace the seasonal bedding plants in summer.

We used

- 2 x 50cm-tall box cones
- 8 x pink cyclamen
- 8 x *Centaurea cineraria*
- 2 x 32cm square faux-lead planters
- 2 x outdoor fairy lights



A close-up photograph of a red-painted wooden window box overflowing with winter plants. The arrangement includes dark green, glossy leaves of Photinia, clusters of small red berries, a large white ornamental kale, and variegated ivy. A string of warm white fairy lights is draped through the foliage. The red planter has white stenciled reindeer on its side. A text box in the lower-left corner provides details about the plants and materials used.

Let it snow

This generous mix of flowers and foliage creates a flamboyant window box with a long shelf life. The ornamental kale sits among the glossy foliage like a giant fluffy snowflake. We sprayed the planter red and decorated it with Christmas stencils, but you could easily leave it blank.

We used

- 3 x ivy
- 2 x pansy 'Antique surprise'
- 3 x pansy 'Red'
- 1 x *Photinia x fraseri* 'Pink Marble'
- 1 x *Skimmia japonica* 'Rubella'
- 1 x white ornamental kale
- Wooden planter W26.5cm, H28cm, L60cm
- Red or amber fairy lights
- White pebbles
- Spray paint (red and white)



Redder than Rudolph

This display is seriously festive. The osmanthus (like holly but softer to touch) enhances the Christmas mood, while the skimmia and conifer add height and structure. We've crammed the plants in for instant impact, but all the plants (apart from the cyclamen) will last for years once planted in the garden. Fake berries, red berry lights and a bow enhance the festive feel.

We used

- *Skimmia japonica* 'Rubella'
- *Osmanthus heterophyllus* 'Goshiki'
- Alberta spruce (*Picea glauca* var. *albertiana*)
- Red outdoor cyclamen
- Wintergreen (*Gaultheria procumbens*)
- 36cm round, stone planter



Pure and simple

This chic display brings elegance to a sheltered porch. The Christmas rose is a delight at this time of year and can be moved to a semi-shaded spot in the garden in spring. A white winter cherry creates a focal point. The cushion bush softens the container edges, while adding texture to the scheme. The silver-sprayed pine cones and battery-powered lights can easily be removed later.

We used

- 1 x White winter cherry
- 1 x Christmas rose (*Helleborus niger*)
- 1 x Cushion bush (*Leucophyta brownii*)
- White battery powered lights
- 36cm galvanised steel oval tub



Monochrome magic

This contemporary mix creates a modern look full of texture and contrast. The cyclamen benefit from being sheltered from cold winds, and will flower non-stop if they are kept well-watered and deadheaded regularly. Poke twigs into the compost and hang small silver baubles from the branches. White battery-powered lights complete the modern look.

We used

- Silver ragwort (*Centaurea cineraria*)
- White outdoor cyclamen
- Black mondo (*Ophiopogon 'Nigrescens'*)
- Battery powered fairy lights
- 28cm black, glazed pot



Opposites attract

Fancy a change from traditional colours? Pink and lime create the perfect contrast for a container that's a real standout. Deadhead the cyclamen regularly and make sure the compost doesn't dry out. The heuchera and tree heather can be planted in the garden later, giving the display life beyond Christmas. Small lime-green baubles and pink battery-powered lights give Yuletide zing.

We used

- Golden tree heather (*Erica* 'Albert's Gold')
- *Heuchera* 'Lime Marmalade'
- Cerise outdoor cyclamen
- Pink battery powered lights
- 30cm green fibreglass planter



Cool Yule logs

This minimalist display is planted in a wooden wine crate, edged with birch. We used birch prunings but some companies supply ready-split logs. Pack the box plants tightly and mulch with moss. The box can be used for hedging later. For an extra twist, add a few twigs sprayed blue.

We used

- 30 x box plants, bare root, 20-30cm tall
- Birch logs approx. 7cm diameter, plus strips of birch bark to edge the box
- Battery powered lights
- Wood glue and garden wire
- Raffia Natura
- Lilac twigs sprayed blue
- Crate L32cm, W26cm, H18cm



Golden touch

The warm tones of this display are perfect for brightening a sheltered porch. The chillies steal the show, but need to be kept frost-free, while the cordyline provides the backbone. The violas, kept deadheaded, will flower non-stop. The carex and cordyline will both do well in the garden when the display is past its best. You could also try include winter cherry, phormiums and bronze-leaved heucheras.

We used

- 1 x Cordyline 'Red Star'
- 2 x Orange chilli plant
- 2 x *Carex comans* bronze-leaved
- 1 x Orange violas
- Battery powered lights



Seasonal greeting

Create a subtle yet sophisticated festive welcome with this combination of powder pinks and glaucous greys, set against slate and charcoal. The simple planting of fresh green mini-pines, cyclamen and early hellebores will give your windowsill a lift for weeks.

We used

- 2 x pink hellebores (*Helleborus x hybridus*)
- 3 x Scots pine (*Pinus sylvestris*)
- 2 x round-leaved cyclamen (*Cyclamen coum*)
- 3 x white-flowered ivy-leaved cyclamen (*Cyclamen hederifolium albiflorum* 'Album')
- Slate chippings
- Rectangular trough planter L73cm, W21cm, H21cm





Happy holly days

Vibrant berries are great at giving winter window boxes a boost. This selection of brightly berried plants will provide plenty of festive colour. Clumps of moss make a handy and attractive mulch. To keep the larger shrubs compact, give their roots a light trim before planting. For extra sparkle, add some decorative Christmas baubles that will shine in the winter light.

We used

- 3 x wintergreen (*Gaultheria procumbens*)
- 1 x holly
- 3 x ivy
- 1 x *Skimmia japonica reevesiana*
- 60cm wrought iron wall trough with liner
- Moss
- Decorative baubles



Frosty sparkle

When weather forecasters can't promise that elusive white Christmas, this planter can add a dusting of winter sparkle to your doorstep. Reach for some festive white bellis for their cheerful, snowy drift of pompoms and surround them in a frosty swirl of festuca, leucophyta and cineraria – the touches of green foliage keeps things looking fresh. Easy to source and easy to plant, this beautiful white display is definitely worth the small outlay.

We used

- 1 x *Centaurea cineraria*
- 1 x *Bellis* daisies
- 1 x *Festuca glauca*
- 1 x *Leucophyta brownii*
- 30cm white planter



Festive ferns

If you're looking for a special gift idea, then something like this will work well. A skimmia is a great container plant, with glossy evergreen leaves and a hint of colour from the buds and flowers. The strappy leaves of a grass and feathery fern add interesting shape and texture. Finally, a few Christmas roses add highlights of white. The best bit is that all of the plants can be planted in the garden once they've outgrown the pot.

We used

- 1 x *Skimmia japonica*
- 1 x *Carex* 'Ice Dance'
- 3 x Christmas rose
(*Helleborus niger*)
- 1 x *Polystichum setiferum*
'Proliferum'
- 40cm terracotta pot



Deck the pots

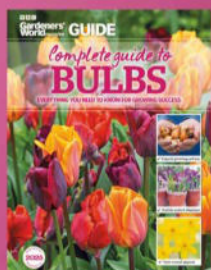
Celebrate the colours of the season by creating this cheery container for a patio or front doorstep. Red and green are classic partners, and here vibrant scarlet cyclamen combine with sturdy evergreens for a display that will look good for most of winter.

We used

- 1 x *Skimmia japonica* 'Rubella'
- 1 x *Picea glauca* 'Conica'
- 1 x *Carex oshimensis* 'Evergold'
- 3 x Red mini cyclamen
- 1 x Green trailing ivy
- 30cm glazed ceramic pot

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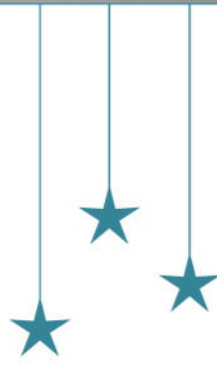
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Festive house plants

Christmas house plants are an easy way to fill your house with colour during the festive season and it's not all about poinsettias. There's a wide variety of plants to choose from, depending on where you want to keep them. Cyclamen and azaleas like it cool and fairly humid, so they suit a frost-free conservatory, enclosed glass porch, or a hallway or landing that's not heated to living-room temperature. Poinsettias and orchids need warmth and humidity, so they are great for living rooms – well cared for, they can both still be in flower in March.





Amaryllis

The flamboyant blooms of amaryllis (*Hippeastrum*) are a welcome sight in winter. They're easy to grow, and take seven to 10 weeks to flower. Planted in mid-to late September, they should flower for Christmas. Keep the plants at 21°C in bright light on a windowsill, but avoid direct sun. When the flowers open, support them and move to a cooler place (minimum 15°C).



Winter cherry

For instant cheer, nothing beats a winter cherry – they're easy to source, and great value, producing their cheery orange fruits for weeks on end. This evergreen loves humidity and damp compost. The fruits can drop in dry conditions, so mist regularly and keep the compost moist, but don't leave them standing in water. Give a bright spot in a cool room above 7°C.



Flowering Katy

These are succulent plants with brilliant blooms that dazzle for months at the tips of shoots carrying thick, succulent leaves. They are low maintenance. Snip off flowers as they fade, and cut back tall stems (making a cut just above a leaf) to promote bushiness. Grow in a bright place at 10°C minimum. Water sparingly to avoid saturating the compost.



Christmas cactus

These succulents make good Christmas gifts – their bright, trumpet-shaped flowers in shades of red, white, pink, purple and even yellow bring welcome winter colour. Their flat, segmented and trailing stems look attractive all year. Place in a semi-shaded, warm spot out of direct sun. Stand on a tray of wet gravel to maintain the humid, jungle-like conditions they thrive on.



Miniature rose

These are roses that have been forced to flower outside their natural season to add colour at Christmas. Keep on a cool, bright windowsill, standing the pot on wet gravel to maintain high humidity. Snip off faded flowers; when they are all finished, prune each stem back by half to a lower leaf, from where new shoots should develop. Miniature roses come in tiny pots, so replot them into larger ones, using multi-purpose compost.



Cymbidium orchid

These are easy, free-flowering orchids. They prefer a cool (but above 10°C), airy and bright spot, away from direct sources of heat. Support the heavy flower spikes. Flowers last 8-10 weeks, after which old spikes can be cut off. Water all year, but more sparingly in winter. Feed fortnightly with an orchid food from spring, stopping in winter. Day/night temperature variation is needed to initiate flowering, so keep plants outside in summer.



Poinsettia

Poinsettias are striking houseplants with showy red 'bracts' that surround the small green-yellow flowers. They are native to Mexico and need a minimum 14°C, avoiding draughts and direct sources of heat, in a bright but not sunny position. Take care not to kill the roots by saturating the compost. Water sparingly each time the compost feels dry, but mist frequently.



Persian cyclamen

This is a small tender cyclamen with scented bright white or pink flowers that is perfect for an indoor spot. It prefers a cool position (but above 12°C) in bright light but out of the sun. Water from below, into a saucer, to avoid liquid sitting on top of the tubers, once the compost dries out, and never leave a pot standing in water. Apply a house plant fertiliser fortnightly.



Phalaenopsis orchid

The phalaenopsis or moth orchid blooms for months with pink, purple or white flowers in a warm, bright position out of direct sun. For best results, grow in light, humid kitchens and bathrooms. Grow in a transparent pot and don't let the bark-based compost dry out – soak it weekly in tepid water for 10 minutes. Drain completely and never leave it standing in water.



Indoor azalea

These cheery houseplants will brighten up a cool, well-ventilated place, such as a conservatory. Place in bright light but not direct sunlight. Keep the compost of this evergreen shrub moist, standing it on a saucer of moist gravel, which will maintain high humidity around the plant. It is an acid-loving plant so water with rainwater, rather than hard tap water.

Countdown to the big day

Follow this at-a-glance timeline to ensure you get the best from your festive house plant displays

Buy

- Look for emerging buds on pot plants (perhaps lurking under the leaves) and healthy green shoots on bulbs.
- Shrubby plants, such as poinsettia and azalea, should have lush even growth and leaf coverage right to the base of the plant. It has got to look healthy planted up and viewed from lots of angles.
- Buy a less developed plant rather than one that is in full bloom too early in the month.



4
weeks
to go

Pot up

- Transfer your growing plants into something more interesting than garden centre plastic pots. Experiment with Christmas pudding bowls, baskets, small wooden crates or reuse old soup tins and glass jars.
- Be vigilant if using a container with no drainage. Don't overwater to avoid rot, and replant after Christmas.
- Different plants need different composts. Most will thrive in John Innes No.2 compost, but azaleas need ericaceous compost, orchids like a proprietary orchid compost, while bulbs and tubers benefit from a bulb compost.



3
weeks
to go

Grow on

- Speed things up or slow things down depending on the maturity of your plants, to make sure they're perfect for Christmas Day. Trial and error is involved, so check your plants on a daily basis.
- To speed up flower buds that aren't developing, move plants to a warmer location; however, don't position them too close to a fire or radiator, and always keep them exposed to natural light.
- To slow down buds that are opening two weeks or more before Christmas Day, move plants to somewhere cooler. Don't leave them on a chilly windowsill overnight with the curtains drawn, or abandon them in a dark cellar, though, and keep them out of draughts.



2
weeks
to go

Decorate

- Add decorative touches, starting with a grit mulch to give a cohesive look and help retain moisture.
- Bring the outdoors in with mosses, cones, pods and seedheads from your garden. Florists and garden centres are a good source of decorative materials, from ribbons and raffia to baubles and beads. Let your plants inspire your colour scheme!
- Twigs are useful for supporting leggy bulbs and can be sprayed with silver glitter, fake snow or left naked and natural.



1
week
to go

Christmas Day!



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★ Forcing bulbs for Christmas

Force your own spring-flowering bulbs for fantastic blooms in time for Christmas – follow our simple guide

Bulbs are easily fooled into treating us to an early glimpse of spring indoors. Get planting from September and in weeks you'll be able to enjoy the pretty blooms of narcissus, the heady scent of hyacinths and a dazzling tulip display. And, if you use a range of different bulbs and stagger the planting, you can ensure there's something in flower at home right through winter, from crocus to alliums.

Some bulbs, such as narcissus and amaryllis, simply need a short spell in a shady spot to get started, while other bulbs, such as hyacinth, crocus and muscari, which come from colder climates, will need a taste of winter. This means a period of cold (maximum 7°C) and dark in your fridge, cellar or

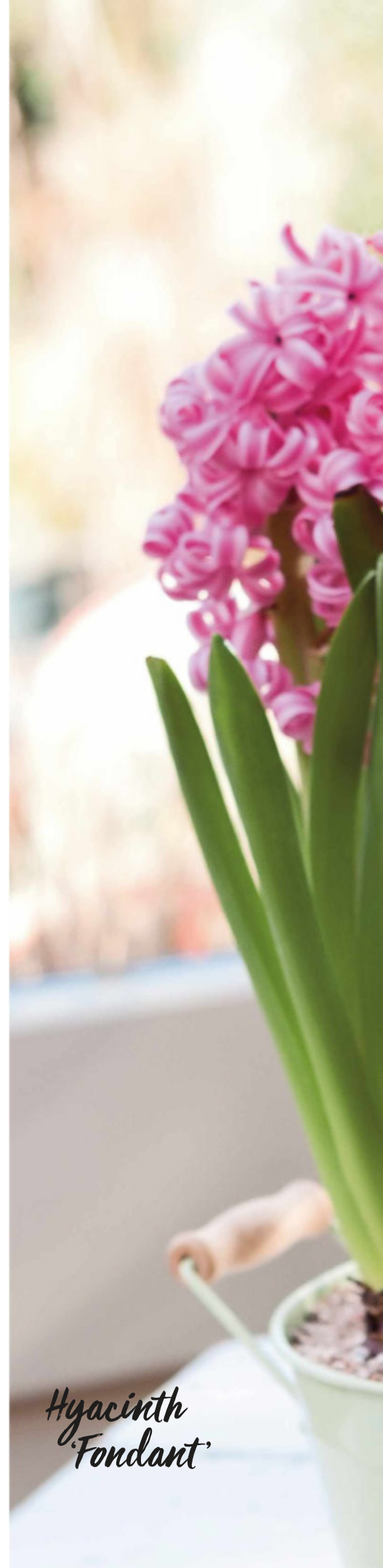
unheated shed. After 8-12 weeks of chilling, their roots will be developing, then 3-4 weeks in a lighter and warmer location gives them the artificial 'spring' they need. Their final flowering position should be warm and bright, but away from direct sunshine.

Bulbs have all the food they need for the season contained within them, making them easy to care for, but make sure they don't dry out or become waterlogged. Be vigilant against overwatering if there are no drainage holes in your pot (carefully tip the container on its side now and again to let excess water run out). For the best results, keep flowering bulbs away from heat sources, so you can enjoy their flowers for as long as possible.



★ The chilling period

- Bulbs that require a cold period need to be chilled at a temperature of around 5-7°C (most fridges are set to around 5°C).
- As bulbs near the end of the chilling period, check that roots have developed and the shoots are around 5cm long.
- For best results, bring them into a cool room away from bright light for a few days so the leaves can green up, and then move them closer to a window in a warmer room.
- Look out for leaves developing faster than the flower buds. If this happens, cover the pot and move it back into the dark for a few days.



*Hyacinth
'Fondant'*





Hyacinths

11-18 weeks to bloom

Standard and prepared hyacinths can be grown in the same way, but prepared bulbs need less chilling because they have been pre-chilled. Plant bulbs to half their depth in bulb fibre. Plant them close together but not touching. Mulch with grit then give them some water. Alternatively, suspend bulbs just above water in hyacinth vases. After their period in a dark, cold spot, check for signs of the flower emerging before moving bulbs into a warm, light room. Don't let the compost dry out or the vase water level fall.

For a Christmas show, start planting in September to early October. Some cultivars will grow faster than others, so if planting different kinds, keep the same type in one pot.

Unprepared bulbs

Weeks of dark/cold: 11-14 weeks

Weeks of light/warm: 3-4 weeks

Varieties to try: 'Delft Blue' (mid blue), 'Splendid Cornelia' (lavender), 'Purple Sensation' (purple), 'Blue Jacket' (dark blue)

Prepared blubs

Weeks of dark/cold: 8-10 weeks

Weeks of light/warm: 3-4 weeks

Varieties to try: 'Fondant' (pink), 'Carnegie' (white), 'L'Innocence' (white), 'Woodstock' (beetroot red), 'Peter Stuyvesant' (dark blue)



'Delft Blue'



Green-flamed tulip



Tulips

17-24 weeks to bloom

If you fancy something different, force some tulip bulbs. They take longer than hyacinths and narcissus, but it's worth the wait. If indoor space is short, cover the bulbs in their pots with bulb compost and find them a cold, north-facing area of the garden for chilling. As flowering begins, plant primroses round the rim of the pot, mulch with moss and bring indoors. Add willow or hazel hoops to support the flowers.

Weeks of dark/cold: 14-20 weeks

Weeks of light/warm: 3-4 weeks

Varieties to try: Those with strong, short stems such as green-flamed 'Formosa', 'Calgary' (white), 'Attila' (pink-violet) or 'Apricot Beauty'

Prepared narcissi

9-11 weeks to bloom

Indoor prepared narcissi are sold ready-treated. The scented paperwhite 'Ziva' will flower 9-11 weeks from planting. Pot up in John Innes No.2 compost so the tops of the bulbs are exposed. Place in a coolish, not too bright room for the first 3-4 weeks, before bringing into brighter light and warmth. The early-flowering 'Ariel' has short stems, making it good for forcing, or you could try 'Tête-à-tête', which is hardy, so you can plant it outdoors after the flowers have faded. You can also pre-chill ordinary narcissi by keeping them in the dark at 5-7°C for 9 weeks, then treat them as prepared bulbs.

Weeks of dark/cold: 3-4 weeks

Weeks of light/warm: 6-7 weeks

Varieties to try: 'Ariel', 'Avalanche', 'Cragford', 'February Gold', 'Peeping Tom', 'Tête-à-tête' and paperwhites 'Inbal' and 'Ziva'



*Paperwhite
narcissus*



Five more bulbs to force

Extend the bulb range that you force this month to ensure a long season of indoor colour over the winter period. Here are five more spectacular flowers.



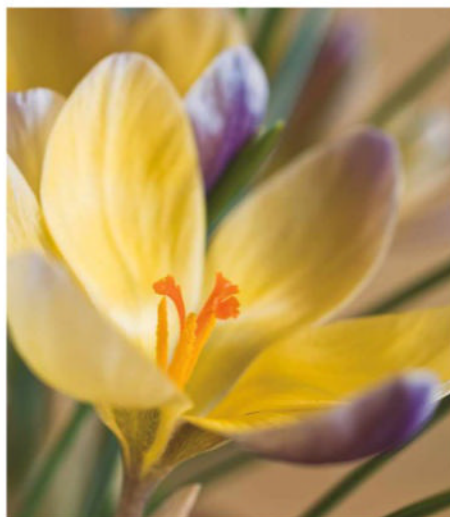
Amaryllis

7-10 weeks to bloom

Before planting, place base of bulb and roots in lukewarm water for two hours. Grow in a vase with water and pebbles or compost.

Weeks of dark/cold: none

Weeks in light/warm: 7-10



Crocus

10-13 weeks to bloom

These bulbs are easy. After chilling the bulbs, check that the roots have developed well before positioning them in a bright room out of direct sunlight to green up and flower.

Weeks of dark/cold: 8-10

Weeks of light/warm: 2-3



Iris reticulata

13-14 weeks to bloom

To enjoy these flowers in time for Christmas, grow these beautiful miniature spring flowers in bulb compost with a little added grit to improve drainage.

Weeks of dark/cold: 10

Weeks of light/warm: 3-4



Grape hyacinth (muscaria)

13-14 weeks to bloom

Plant as many as you can fit in a small terracotta pots without them touching, making sure their roots are engaged with moist bulb compost.

Weeks of dark/cold: 10

Weeks of light/warm: 3-4



Snakeshead fritillary

17-18 weeks to bloom

These enjoy a moist compost, but don't let them get waterlogged. Watch out for mice attacking the bulbs!

Weeks of dark/cold: 15

Weeks of light/warm: 2-3

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Tree lanterns



Light up your garden

Bring your garden and house to life this Christmas, using lighting to add sparkle for the festive season and beyond. You can keep things simple with battery operated lights or solar-powered lights, or for a larger festive display, consider mains-powered products.

Candle-lit lanterns are another option for a fast transformation of a party space. As a rule, ice-white lights provide a contemporary look, while warm-white ones create a more traditional feel. Multi-coloured lights help create a sense of fun – just take your pick.





Highlight plants

Set off plants that look good at this time of year, such as evergreen grasses or shrubs, with a spike light, to add to a sparkling garden display that looks atmospheric from indoors.



Add festive flair

Decorate for a winter party with some stylish candle-lit lanterns. The metal lattice work will prevent the candles from blowing out, while creating a warm and welcoming atmosphere.



Front door magic

Create a magical decoration for your front door using outdoor fairy lights to enhance seasonal foliage and seedheads.



Tree lanterns

Dress a mature tree up with hanging tealight lanterns and mini disco ball style baubles that will sparkle in the candlelight.



Wrap it up

Transform a tree with a string of LED lights. Attach to an outdoor extension cord then, starting at the trunk's base, wrap the lights upwards. Aim for uniform spacing between each wraparound for a special effect.

Bring the outside in

A decorated bay tree will happily live by a hearthside or hallway over the holiday period, wafting aromatic vapours over passers by. This one has an edible theme, with bundles of cinnamon sticks and dried fruit. For an added flourish, make gingerbread men or air dry apple and pear rings. Complete the look with round, woven, rustic lights, which glow with mellow ambiance.





TOP TIPS

How to be cost efficient

- **CHOOSE LED lights.** They last at least five times longer than halogen bulbs and are cheaper to run, coming in wattage as low as 1W
- **USE a timer** for garden lights to keep electricity consumption low
- **INVEST in good quality fittings** that allow you to change bulbs and avoid having to buy a new fitting when the bulb blows
- **CONSIDER solar-powered lights** for year-round displays that cost nothing to run
- **CALCULATE the cost** of running a lighting display – wattage of bulb x hours used, divide by 1,000 and multiply by your supplier's kWh rate.

Fast festive fixes

- **DRESS hedges with net lighting** for a Christmassy look – instant impact and an even effect
- **USE simple strings of lights** and lanterns to decorate plants, entrances and windowsills – keep the illuminated Santas to a minimum
- **COMBINE several easy projects** for an effective festive display: add battery-operated fairy lights to a wreath or a pile of twigs in pots; and turn an outdoor tree into a Christmas tree with hanging lanterns
- **POSITION candle-lit lanterns** on windowsills to give a warm welcome

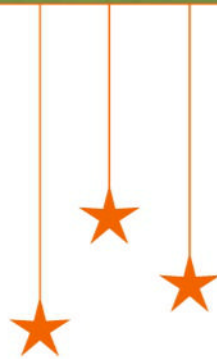
Stay safe

- **ONLY use lights which** are approved for outdoor use and are supplied with a transformer
- **MAKE sure outdoor lighting** is RCD-protected – this is a circuit breaker that cuts off electricity if a cable is cut accidentally
- **LOOK for the IP rating** on light fittings; the higher the rating, the more robust and weather resistant it will be
- **CHOOSE lights with** a CE or UKCA symbol and ENEC approved mark
- **THE National Inspection Council** for Electrical Installation Contracting recommends using a registered electrician to install permanent garden lighting
- **REMEMBER: never leave** a naked flame near dry/flammable materials

Enhance birch stems

Birch trees are a stalwart of the winter garden and a handful of stems can do the same thing for your living room at Christmas. If you don't have a birch, you can buy the stems from a good florist. Arrange them in a planter full of compost, mulch with pebbles and decorate with lights. A set or two of fairy lights is enough. Wind the lights round the branches, as you would with a traditional Christmas tree. White or transparent wires will 'disappear', when lit.





Christmas plant care

It's easy to make your home look festive at Christmas with a tree and vibrant houseplants, but how do you keep everything looking at its best? It used to be traditional to buy a tree on Christmas Eve, but many people now buy them in the first week of December, meaning they have to last for weeks – discover how to choose the best tree and keep it green and healthy until Christmas Day. We also have some expert tips on how to look after your house plants and keep them growing healthily into next year.



Christmas tree guide

Make sure your Christmas tree

is a success by choosing carefully and conditioning it before you decorate. Our traditional tree is the Norway Spruce (*Picea abies*). It's a good choice but the soft-needled Nordmann and Fraser firs challenge the spruce for scent, needle retention and their narrow, space-saving, habit.

Before you go shopping, measure the space where your tree will go. Net wrapping will protect the tree when transported and if it has to be put on your car roof, have the base facing forward to protect branches from wind damage and moisture loss.

Picking your variety



Nordmann fir This is the UK's most popular Christmas tree, thanks to its non-drop needles. It has a broad shape and dense foliage but it can be tricky to hang decorations with short loops on the wide branches, plus it's the most expensive.



Norway spruce This tree has a wonderful scent and open habit. It's the cheapest to buy but you must look after it as you would a bunch of cut flowers and top up the water frequently or it will shed its needles very quickly.



Fraser fir Like a scaled-up version of a Christmas cake decoration, this fir has soft, shiny needles and a dense, conical shape, but is narrower and with more scent than a Nordmann, though prices are likely to be similar.

You could also try: blue spruce – powder-blue colour and cheaper than firs; Scots and lodgepole pines – both hold their foliage well, but the long needles can make them tricky to decorate.



Choosing a healthy tree

A few quick checks can help you get the best Christmas tree possible.

- Lift the tree to check its weight. A heavy tree has been cut recently and has a high water content. A light tree is a dry tree!
- Growth should look vibrant and healthy, not dull or dry. Check for freshness by gently bouncing the base on the ground – expect a few brown needles to fall from inside, but beware of trees shedding lots of green or outer ones.
- Run your hand along the stems. They should be springy and only shed old needles.

How to store your tree

- Keep the netting cover on while you saw the trunk off level for it to stand upright. This also exposes fresh stem that takes up water readily.
- Keep the tree in a bucket of water for a day or two outside to absorb liquid before moving it indoors. Keep outside in a shady spot or an unheated outhouse before bringing indoors.
- Cut out crowded branches before bringing your tree inside. This gives it a more graceful shape and helps to slow the rate of water loss from the needles.



Watering tips

Secure the tree in a water-retaining stand that is sufficiently wide – don't cut the trunk to squeeze into a small stand or the tree won't take up water properly – then release the branches from the netting. Fill the stand with water and keep the needles fresh by topping up the water every couple of days. Alternatively, use a bucket and wedge the trunk with stones. Top up the water every day so the base is constantly immersed. There are commercial additives but plain water is perfectly fine. Never use additives if you have pets that may drink the water.



Positioning your tree

Place the tree away from direct heat and not too close to an open fire or radiator, for the longest possible display of fresh, scented needles. Give it plenty of space for air to circulate around it, too. Also, turn off your fairy lights at night, because the heat they produce dries out the needles.

Christmas house plant aftercare

If you were given or bought

house plants for Christmas, you might be wondering what to do next. Flowers can fade, fruits fall off and leaves look stressed after just a few weeks. But don't worry – with these expert tips you can get the best out of your plants, from an ailing amaryllis to a worn-out winter cherry.

Not all house plants are worth keeping after Christmas, but with a little care, you should be able to keep many of them growing well from year to year.



Indoor azaleas

Azaleas flower best when they're tightly potbound, although do benefit from repotting into ericaceous compost in spring. Stand them outside in a shady part of the garden during the summer. Deadhead and keep cool and very moist, using rainwater or cold boiled water. Bring indoors in autumn. They need cold, but not freezing weather to make buds. To keep humidity high, stand the pot on a saucer of damp pebbles.

Temperature 10-16°C

Lighting Medium light

Water Two or three times a week – soak and drain, using rainwater, filtered or cooled boiled water.



Amaryllis

Water sparingly, unless the plant has leaves. When in leaf, add a general plant food to the water weekly. Reduce watering for eight weeks from September, keeping it at 13°C. When flowering is over, allow the stems to die before removing, and keep the plant drier. If leaves turn yellow, stop watering in summer and resume in October. If it stays evergreen, water sparingly in summer.

Temperature 16-21°C

Lighting High light

Water Very sparingly from above until the flower is well clear of the bulb, then water once or twice a week.

Christmas cactus

Stand in a warm, bright but not sunny spot, on damp pebbles. Feed with houseplant food each week in summer, then stop in September. After flowering keep cooler (10-12°C) and drier and stand for eight weeks. Stand the plant in shade outside in summer. Bring indoors in September and keep cool and dryish to trigger flower buds.

Temperature 13-21°C

Lighting Medium light

Water Twice weekly (depending on heating).





Indoor cyclamen

Tug out spent flowers regularly, pulling stems from the corm. Let corms dry when flowering ends and store the dry corm in its pot indoors over the summer. Resume gentle watering in August and repot if needed. Keep in a cool, bright position. Feed once a month with house plant food. Stop watering as it goes dormant for the summer. When new growth appears, start watering again.

Temperature 10-16°C

Lighting Medium light

Water Only when the compost is beginning to dry out – perhaps once or twice a week – soak and drain, and never leave standing in water.



Cymbidium orchids

Repot in spring if roots are bursting out of the pot. Stand in shade outside in summer to encourage flowers but keep them out of direct sunlight to prevent leaf scorch.

During the growing season feed with an orchid food every three weeks and tie flowering stems to a split cane to stop them falling over. Cut flower stems off at the base when flowering has finished.

Temperature 13-18°C

Lighting Medium light

Water Twice weekly – soak and drain, using rainwater, filtered or cooled, boiled water; keep humid. In winter, water sparingly.



Poinsettias

After Christmas keep in a warm, light, draught-free spot on a pebble tray. Water sparingly. Add tomato feed to water once a month. Cut back hard in April and repot. From September, allow only 8-12 hours of light daily to produce good Christmas colour. After flowering ends, prune stems back and keep drier; repot six weeks later and gradually increase watering.

Temperature 16-21°C

Lighting Medium light

Water Twice weekly; let compost surface dry out then soak and drain; keep humid.



Flowering Katy

Apply a general plant food monthly. Plants in plastic pots get top-heavy as the compost dries out, so repot into larger pots in spring using gritty, free-draining compost. After flowering, deadhead the plant and reduce watering, then keep it cool to 'rest' in spring, resuming the normal watering regime in summer.

Temperature 10-16°C

Lighting Medium light – it requires a brighter spot in winter

Water Weekly from above; allow the pot to dry out between waterings.

Phalaenopsis orchid

Once the blooms have fallen, cut back to a swollen bud lower down the stalk, as a new flower stalk will often develop. Repot when roots have filled the pot (see p128). Use an orchid food at every other watering. Prune back old flower stems to a new bud when flowering finishes.

Temperature 18-24°C

Lighting Medium light

Water Weekly, soak and drain – use rainwater or filtered or boiled and cooled water from the kettle; keep humid.



Winter cherry

Feed every fortnight with house plant food. Once fruits fall, repot and shorten stems by half to encourage new growth, and reduce watering for a few months. Repot in spring if needed. Pollinate the flowers with a paintbrush to get more fruits. Spray the plant with water when in flower to aid pollination. Stand the plant outside in shade in summer and bring indoors in September. Beware: fruits are poisonous if ingested.

Temperature 10-16°C

Lighting Medium-high light

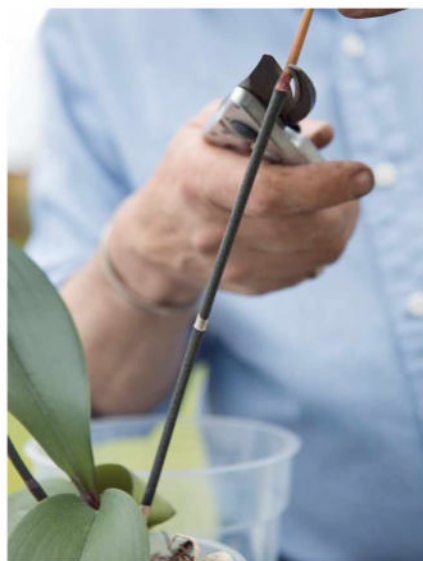
Water Twice weekly from above; keep moist and humid.

★
How-to

Re-pot a moth orchid

Orchids have a reputation for

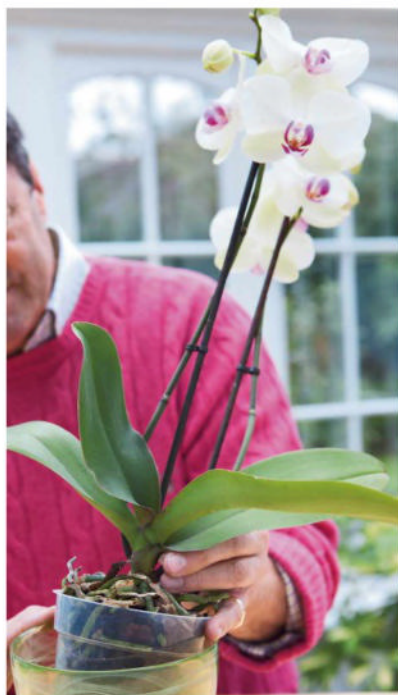
being fussy but moth (or Phalaenopsis) orchids are different – they make neat plants that flower freely in living-room conditions almost all year round. In the wild, moth orchids grow in tropical jungles high up in trees, in niches filled with moss and dead bark. This provides free-draining conditions, but the function of the ‘compost’ is mainly to hold the plant upright; moisture comes from the high humidity soaked up by the aerial roots. The roots also photosynthesise, helping to feed the plant. Moth orchids are grown in transparent pots so the roots are tidily contained without hindering their work. The plants only need repotting when they are absolutely bursting out of the pot.



1 When the flowers are over, wait for several weeks before cutting back the flower spike. When a green bud forms lower down, cut the stalk off just above it using clean, sharp secateurs.



2 Moth orchids can be repotted at any time of year. Soak the compost thoroughly before repotting, then tip the plant carefully out of its pot without breaking up the ball of roots.



3 Use a clear plastic pot a size larger than the original, and special orchid compost. Put a little in the base, sit the plant inside and fill the gap round the edge.



4 Most of the aerial roots should be coiled inside the new pot, but any that are too long or badly placed are best cut off cleanly to leave the plant looking tidy.

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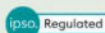
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